

READERS WHO PONDER: DEVELOPING ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

BIANCA BERTALLI

Bianca Bertalli examines how children's literature can be used to develop ethical understanding and to address complex issues such as asylum seeking, climate change or social inequalities...

ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE PRIMARY YEARS

While the internet delivers information and communication more readily than ever before, a disconnect in ethical decision making by young people in online and offline contexts, is becoming increasingly apparent (James, 2016). To enable students to apply positively principled decision-making strategies to a wide variety of issues, students require opportunities to build ethical understanding throughout their early primary school years and beyond (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.). Quality fiction texts in primary school libraries can lay the foundation for learning centred around ethical understanding including values, rights and responsibilities around global issues such as sustainability, democracy and conflict (Johnston, 2017; Johansson, 2013; Lyngfelt, Sporre, Lifmark, Lilja, Osbeck & Franck, 2022; Baird Saenger, 1993).

THE INCREASING COMPLEXITY OF CONTEMPORARY PICTURE BOOKS

Humans have a long history in visual storytelling. Across the world- and across time- cultural knowledge has informed the composition and interpretation of visual and multi-modal texts (Lyngfelt, Sporre, Lifmark, Lilja, Osbeck & Franck, 2022; Johnston, 2017). Cooper (2026) points to Murujuga Aboriginal rock art as an example of some of the earliest records of the human experience, told through petroglyphs. Created at least 50 000 years ago, these images continue to tell significant stories today. While traditional children's literature from the 18th century onwards often served the didactic purpose of instilling a spiritual education, the turn of the 20th century saw children's literature begin to centre children as characters, with plots and purposes of their own (Broomhall, McEwan & Tarbin, 2017). Contemporary picture books usually combine written and visual modes of communication and encompass a growing number of styles and formats (Johnston, 2017).

Postmodern picture books of the late 20th and early 21st centuries marked a notable change in the way stories are told. These texts often present narrative gaps in which readers must infer their own comprehension of the text. They may also feature ambiguous or inconclusive endings that prompt readers to ponder their own understanding of what has occurred and why (Johnston, 2017; Gleeson, 2021). The increasing complexity of picture books easily lends itself to exploring philosophy or ethics while also simultaneously fostering an early love of reading (Johnston, 2017; Johansson, 2013; Lyngfelt, et. al., 2022; Broomhall et. al., 2017; Gleeson, 2021). While moving away from traditional religious instruction, contemporary literature still assists students to understand the shared values, beliefs, and relationships of their world (Broomhall, McEwan & Tarbin, 2017).

Baird Saenger (1993) suggests that exploring ethics through literature has the potential to improve the clarity and strength of students' reasoning and instil the ability to listen more closely, articulate thoughts and reflect on actions. In 2022, Lyngfelt, et. al. examined how fiction could be used to develop students' critical reflection around complex moral issues such as immigration, climate change, war, relationships, and the uncertainty of the future. The researchers found that through fiction, students can deeply and emotionally experience different forms of the world, or of the human condition, and create intrinsic motivation for exploring ethical change.

PICTURE BOOKS THAT ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO PONDER

To 'ponder' is to engage in deep and considered thinking before reaching a decision or conclusion (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Quality fiction narratives successfully build complex characters through which students can carefully explore varying perspectives of plot points, while applying an ethical thinking lens (Lyngfelt, Sporre, Lifmark, Lilja, Osbeck & Franck, 2022). Teachers inter-

viewed in the Lyngfelt et. al. (2022) study acknowledged that while many longer texts may be suitable for independent readers, it is vital to consider the linguistic ability of students and their aptitude to unpack literary devices or access comprehension skills. Given that the Australian Curriculum requires the general capability of Ethical Understanding to be taught beginning in the foundation year of school (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, n.d.), picture books provide the solution to enabling younger readers to ponder ethical thinking, supporting knowledge development through visual literacy, accessible vocabulary, and relatable characters (Johnston, 2017).

SHORT TEXTS ADD LONG-TERM VALUE TO THE COLLECTION

A cursory glance at the Children's Book Council Australia shortlisted picture books in the last 5 years shows an abundance of texts that tackle themes through which ethical understanding can be explored. The Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (2021) describes ethical understanding as a continuum of learning that allows students to identify differing perspectives, explore moral and ethical concepts, and apply ethical thinking in response to an issue. Teacher librarians and classroom teachers can purposefully select texts through which students can build 'deep literacy'. This term, coined by Johnston (2017), aims to describe a profound level of emotional understanding that influences thoughts and behaviours beyond the initial engagement with the book. Lyngfelt, et al. (2023) found that an emotional engagement with children's literature assisted children to become more aware of their own ethical responsibilities and their place in the world, as well as developing a sense of justice for others.

Collection development in the Australian school library setting should be guided by the 2023 Australian Library and Information Association and Australian School Library Association [ALIA & ASLA] values. The inclusion of picture books that support students to develop ethical understanding enables the exchange of ideas and information, the promoting of democratic values, and the representation of diversity with the aim of advocating for human rights, sustainability, peace, social inclusion and other challenges the future may bring. Further, ALIA's endorsement of the principles of the '2030 Sustainable Development Goals' and 'United Nations Universal

Declaration of Human Rights- Article 19' reflects ACARA's description of ethical understanding as vital in responding to '*human rights and responsibilities, environmental issues and global justice*' (2021, para. 2). Picture books often place children as the central characters navigating the complex ethical issues at hand and imbued with the power to make a difference, and this supports students to become accountable for their actions, providing the foundations to participate fully in the Australian democratic society (ACARA, n.d.). The development of collaborative discussion skills, centred on ethical reasoning, are at the heart of enabling respectful discussion and robust philosophical debates (Lyngfelt, et al., 2023), aligning with the ALIA value that libraries should 'promote the free flow of information and ideas' (2023, para. 6). Additionally, ALIA promotes broad library collections as essential to benefiting '*a thriving culture, economy and democracy*' (2023, para. 6) and as such, ethics-focused picture books are vital to the primary school library collection.

THE BRIDGE: THE TEACHER LIBRARIAN, ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING AND THE FUTURE

While exploring quality literature has always been at the heart of the teacher librarian role, the changing information landscape means that this role must also evolve (ASLA, 2004). James (2016) argues that with the burst of information communication technologies, a deficit in online ethical behaviour is often demonstrated by young people by their conduct in online communities, attention to privacy, and the treatment of intellectual property. As dual leaders in educational pedagogy and information literacy, teacher librarians must bridge the connection between offline and online ethics, when addressing information creation and consumption with their students. To do this, teacher librarians are required to ensure that the library's literary collection is carefully curated to respond to the learning needs of their students and the call to strengthen ethical understanding across online and offline domains (ASLA, 2004; ACARA, n.d.). By selecting picture books that deal with morally complex social issues, teacher librarians utilise the 'bridging capacity' of children's literature, allowing students to understand the impact of their behaviour on those outside their world as well as a deeper understanding of '*fairness for themselves and others*' before they move online (NSW Department of Education, 2021, p. 29).

In a joint statement, ASLA and ALIA determined that

school libraries are ‘*necessary to create safe, confident users of online content*’, tasking teacher librarians with the responsibility to support students in recognising opportunities to respond ethically when participating online (2004, para. 1). For example, choosing picture books that help children to deeply understand the values of honesty and integrity may influence them to transfer their ethical thinking between offline and online domains, when it comes to content creation, the use of AI or cyberbullying, in the future. As children now access technology that enables them to both decode and encode information through social media applications, computer software, and handheld devices (often before they can even read or write), the ethics of information creation must be considered far earlier than ever before (Johnston, 2017; ACARA, 2021). By the end of primary school, students should be able to ‘*monitor consistency between rights and responsibilities when interacting face-to-face or through social media*’ (ACARA, n.d., p. 2). James (2016) suggests that to combat the ethical disconnect currently experienced by young people, students require models and mentors to teach ways to connect more consciously online. The teacher librarian must serve as a bridge in developing ethical understanding offline and online, by explicitly teaching the general capability of ethical understanding across a learning continuum beginning with text choice in the first years of school.

EXEMPLAR PICTURE BOOKS FOR ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING

Detailed illustrations draw on students’ visual literacy skills, communicating on an emotional level as well as supporting an understanding of place and context for younger readers who have limited cultural currency (Johnston, 2017). *The Invisible* by Tom Percival (2021) tells the story from the perspective of a young girl facing poverty and homelessness. While these issues may normally elude relatability for some younger children, the illustrations laced in cool greys and blues resonate with the reader as the protagonist literally fades away in her sadness. As Isabel becomes invisible in an unfamiliar city, she notices the other ‘invisible people’. Directed at ages 3 and up, this sophisticated picture book allows children of all ages to ponder what it is that might alienate someone to the point of feeling invisible, as well as ways we can each address inequality, exclusion, poverty, and loneliness (Simon & Shuster, 2023).

While Percival’s (2021) story follows a linear storyline-orientation, complication, resolution- *Paradise Sands: A Story of Enchantment*, written and illustrated by Levi Pinfold (2023) echoes other postmodern picture books and provides gaps in the narrative and an ambiguous ending. This format provides opportunities for students to examine the ethical decisions faced by the female lead character as well as morally complex themes as identified by The Children’s Book Council Australia (2023) including ‘*entrapment, courage, wisdom, patience, belief, temptation and, above all, love*’ (para. 2). Set in an eerie desert, three children trespass onto a desolate property and face a foretold meeting with a powerful being called ‘The Teller’. The young girl must make a bargain, demonstrating bravery and resilience, to free her siblings. Written for children aged 5 and up (though perhaps thematically better suited to older readers), stunning illustrations hold hidden layers of visual details that provide a firm platform for discussion and scope for broad interpretation, especially for students who may not yet understand the nuances of figurative language (Johansson, 2013; Lyngfelt, et. al., 2022; Baird Saenger, 1993; Walker Books, 2023; Hillel, 2023).

Also purposefully crafting equivocality within its storyline and themes, is Margaret Wild’s (2018) *The Feather*. Illustrated by Freya Blackwood, the picture book presents a setting that Boulanger-Mashberg describes as ‘anonymous’ (2023, para. 2), leaving space for readers to discuss or infer why the trees are barren and the sun and moon are forever covered. Two young children discover a large glowing, white feather. However, once the town’s adults begin to dictate how the feather should be held and protected, it loses its luminescence and begins to blacken. In the end it is the dreams of the children which restore and free the feather and it is left for the reader to interpret why. The text and images work together to tell a powerful story that explores selflessness, kindness, redemption, hope and the power that children hold to change the world when their voices are valued (Boulanger-Mashberg, 2023).

Text complexity is a primary consideration when choosing a book for younger readers (Baird Saenger, 1993) however, Johnston (2017) makes the point that in just a few words, complex ideas can be communicated, and simple statements can indeed be so profound that they require time reserved for the reader to ruminate. A

picture book in which short rhyming couplets serve to provoke deep thinking is Matthew McConaughey's (2023) *Just Because*, illustrated by Renée Kurilla. Through examining contradictions in the ways we perceive the world around us, McConaughey uses powerful prose to challenge students' aged 4-8 years views on ethical concepts such as honesty, respect, and fairness (ACARA, n.d.)

Room on our Rock by Kate and Jol Temple (2019), illustrated by Terri Rose Baynton, informs readers from the outset that there are two sides to every story. This statement opens the possibility for defining multiple perspectives and what this might look like for children. Temple & Temple (2019) have written their book to be read in the first instance front to back, presenting the point of view of a group of unsympathetic seals who refuse to shelter two strangers. The book then asks readers to read from back to front, where the story is instead delivered through the eyes of the desperate, anthropomorphic asylum seekers. The powerful narrative flip has the potential for deep learning around 'human rights and responsibilities, animal rights, environmental issues and global justice' as described in the ACARA general capability of ethical understanding (ACARA, n.d., para. 2).

The NSW Teachers Federation library holds an extensive collection of picture books designed to engage students in understanding ethical thinking, social justice or diversity. These are available to members to loan for free.

REFERENCES:

- Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority. (n.d). *Ethical Understanding* (Version 8.4). <https://www.australian-curriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/ethical-understanding/>
- Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority. (n.d). *Ethical Understanding learning continuum*. <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/media/1073/general-capabilities-ethical-understanding-learning-continuum.pdf>
- Australian Library and Information Association (2023) *What we do*. <https://alia.org.au/Web/Web/About-Us/What-we-do.aspx#:~:text=Our%20agenda,do%20not%20believe%20in%20censorship.>
- Australian Library and Information Association and Australian School Library Association. (2016). *Statement on information literacy*. https://asla.org.au/resources/Documents/Website%20Documents/Policies/policy_Information_Literacy.pdf
- Australian School Library Association. (2004). *ALIA-ASLA standards of professional excellence for teacher librarians*. <https://read.alia.org.au/alia-asla-standards-professional-excellence-teacher-librarians>
- Baird Saenger, E. (1993). *Exploring ethics through children's literature* (Books 1–2). Pacific Grove, CA: Critical Thinking Press & Software.
- Boulanger-Mashberg, A. (2023). *The Feather*. Freya Blackwood. <https://www.freyablackwood.com.au/the-feather-1>
- Broomhall, S., McEwan, J., & Tarbin, S. (2017, March 30). *Once upon a time: A brief history of children's literature*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/once-upon-a-time-a-brief-history-of-childrens-literature-75205>
- Childrens Book Council Australia. (2023) *Previous winners*. <https://www.cbca.org.au/previous-winners>
- The Childrens Book Council Australia. (2023). *Paradise sands: a story of enchantment*. <https://www.cbca.org.au/book/paradise-sands-a-story-of-enchantment>
- Cochrane, G. (2018, February 5). Picture books are relevant for students of all ages. National Library of New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/blog/posts/picture-books-are-relevant-for-students-of-all-ages>
- Cooper, R. (March 23, 2026). Sydney media conferences staggering gaslighting pf traditional custodians must be called out. Cheek Media Co. <https://cheekmedia.substack.com/p/sydney-media-conferences-staggering>
- Gleeson, B. (2022). Are they getting the picture? Access, 36(1), 41-48. The National Library of New Zealand. (n.d.). Services to schools. <https://natlib.govt.nz/schools>
- Hillel, M. (2023). *Paradise sands*. The Children's Book Council of Australia. <https://readingtime.com.au/paradise-sands/>
- James, C. (2016). *Disconnected; youth, new media, and the ethics gap*. Random House US.
- Johansson, V. (2013). "I am scared too": Children's Literature for an Ethics beyond Moral Concepts. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 47(4), 80–109. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021871813000000>

[org/10.5406/jaesteduc.47.4.0080](https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.47.4.0080)

Johnston, R. R. (2017). *Australian Literature for Young People*. Oxford University Press.

Lyngfelt, A., Sporre, K., Lifmark, D., Lilja, A., Osbeck, C., & Franck, O. (2023). Bridging “as is” and “as if” by reading fiction in ethics education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 53(1), 63–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2022.2075323>

McConaughey, M. (2023). *Just because*. Penguin Random House.

New South Wales Department of Education. (2022). Information Fluency framework. https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/media/documents/Information_fluency_framework.pdf

Oxford English Dictionary. (2023). Oxford University Press; Oxford English Dictionary. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1284911909>

Percival, T. (2021). *The invisible*. Simon and Shuster.

Pinfold, L. (2023) *Paradise sands: a story of enchantment*. Walker Books Australia.

Simon and Shuster (2023) *The invisible* by Tom Percival. <https://www.simonandschuster.com.au/books/The-Invisible/Tom-Percival/9781471191305>

Temple, K. & Temple, J. (2019). *Room on our rock*. Scholastic Australia.

Walker Books (2023). *Paradise sands: a story of enchantment*. <https://www.walkerbooks.com.au/book/9781406383942/>

Wild, M. (2018). *The feather*. Hardie Grant Egmont.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bianca Bertalli is a NSW Department of Education teacher librarian K-6, at Gol Gol Public School in the Rural Far West. She is a recent graduate of the Charles Sturt University Master of Education (Teacher Librarianship) and a NSW Department of Education Specialist Teacher Scholarship recipient. Bianca began teaching in 2010, as a classroom teacher in the inner city of Sydney, where she previously served as an elected government school representative on the Quality Teaching Council. Bianca has presented at courses and conferences to support early career teachers to develop skills in classroom management, planning/ programming and the accreditation process. She has been an active member of the NSW Teachers Federation for the past 17 years.

